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PRIVATE PICTURES AND PUBLIC SECRETS:

Responding to transgressive soldier-produced imagery in UK news

New media technologies present greater opportunities for the unguarded and personalized aspects of war to be shared in public spaces, including an element that militaries prefer remains unseen: the depiction of “*our boys*” killing. *This article examines how soldiers’ transgressive visual practices of posing with dead bodies during the war in Afghanistan are re-presented in the mainstream UK press, and analyses the reactions garnered from group interviews with serving military media operations personnel, veterans’ groups and forces families.*

Contradictory impulses are revealed *in the news media’s outraged* revelling in the presumed scandal, and in the focus group participant responses, many of whom reject the premise for the news story whilst also acknowledging common experiences of combat and the *desire to show others “what war’s like”*. The article therefore contributes to debates on the news mediation of amateur snapshot images, the imbrication of photographic practices in wartime experience, and the limitations of the news media as national moral arbiters. In prioritizing a methodological and analytical focus on the (military) audience rather than the news coverage, the article highlights how engagement with journalistic images and texts can act as a catalyst for identity-affirmation and for thinking critically about the military-media nexus.

Keywords: Afghanistan; focus groups; killing; military; photography; mediation; transgression; war

PRIVATE PICTURES AND PUBLIC SECRETS: Responding to transgressive soldier-produced imagery in UK news

This study draws on a press photo-story of alleged soldier transgressions in Afghanistan to explore both the news reporting of leaked soldier-produced photographs, and the reactions to this photo-story garnered from group interviews with serving media operations personnel, veterans' groups and forces families. The photographs apparently depict a British RAF serviceman posing next to a "dead Taliban fighter". Primarily concerned with what we can learn from the responses of those with direct experience of war and its after-effects, I contend that the news treatment of this snapshot style imagery presents a particularly rich example through which to explore the unsettling relationship that the press and public have with the act of killing in war, and the jarring discomfort experienced when "our boys" are shown to not only take part in seemingly reprehensible activities, but to picture themselves celebrating such acts.

Following Christine Sylvester's call to "draw from a wide range of literatures, fictional and factual, from social science and the arts and humanities" (2012, 503) to better study "war as experience", the current article offers the particular photo news story as an entry point into broader current debates. I am concerned here with the represented experience of war for the soldier 'on the ground' and the responses to such media portrayals.¹ The choice of a controversial (yet ambiguous) news story is deliberate: research shows that the vast majority of news depicts the nation's own military in a positive light during wartime (Knightley 2003; Robinson et al. 2010), so a story which centres on the investigation of British RAF servicemen for posing with a dead fighter offers a potential break with the dominant news portrayal and an opportunity to tease apart the ambiguities and contradictions which emerge when soldiers' own visual practices result in negative coverage.

In what follows I argue that the multiple layers of visual mediation in this news story are important to examine. The press photo-story re-presents or re-frames not only the digital snapshots, but the images uploaded to a website (LiveLeak); each mediating layer transforms their status from private to public pictures. Each stage is a form of visual communication involving soldiering: the initial celebratory snapshot; the uploading to a website renowned for transgressive images; and the news treatment where such conduct is framed as shameful.

The very fact that the soldier is 'posing' within the image is a crucial factor in his potential ruin, yet his face is later obscured (pixilated). The private snapshots, which typify a communicative intent to share a 'here and now' experience, transform into evidentiary texts that invite public opprobrium. The news treatment expects and to varying degrees attempts to manage reader outrage, but how is such outrage channelled and for what purposes? In analysis of the interviewees' responses, I explore the tensions and contradictions at play, revealed through the multiple and varied reactions. How might their perceptions of press (mis)representation elucidate misunderstandings about war? In prioritizing a methodological and analytical focus on the (military) audience rather than the news coverage, the article highlights how engagement with journalistic images and texts can act as a catalyst for identity-affirmation and for thinking critically about the military-media nexus.

Pontificating on the morality of the soldier, especially from the comfort of a newsdesk or armchair, alerts us to the ways in which news media and popular culture customarily construct a virtuous soldier, who dies for his country, rather than kills (Bourke 1999). A more honest and pluralistic approach to wartime experience holds the potential to create dialogue and understanding across political differences without necessarily compromising our own critical perspectives. Tom Engelhardt has recently suggested that a lack of democratic oversight follows when "[w]ar is no longer a part of our collective lives" (2015, n.p.). This

observation should not only worry those who extoll the virtues of the military and its ethos of collective endeavour; it should also worry those of us committed to scrutinizing the ways wars are justified, portrayed and remembered.

The next section presents the research context for the study, focusing on how soldiers from Western military forces have attempted to mediate their experiences to wider publics, with a focus on visual forms, and the changing media environment which appears to be opening up new spaces for both technological and psychological fractures. More specifically, I then introduce the featured news story from May 2014, providing an overview of how it was covered in the UK media along with the original uploading onto LiveLeak. The analysis from the group interview transcripts follows this, showing how the story led to insightful discussions, not only about the ways in which both the media and military (mis)handle such occasions, but also the relationships between soldier photography, identity and military cohesion.

The mediating soldier: Representing what war feels like

The unsettling and potentially disorientating photographs from Camp Bastion are framed within the news context as a moral scandal, a transgression in military conduct, but, as analysed below, the press printed version of the main photograph hides as much as it reveals. For the purposes of this study, news frames are understood as the patterns of “selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organise discourse, whether verbal or visual” (Gitlin 1980, 7, emphasis in original), but the intention here is not to conduct a systematic framing study. Rather, the news presentation is briefly explored as one site in which the “dialectical” processes of mediation and meaning construction can be observed (Silverstone 2005). The photographing practices of the soldiers in Afghanistan, the later uploading to a website for leaked imagery and the news patterns of selection and emphasis all speak to the ways in processes of mediation are “both institutionally and technologically driven and embedded” (Silverstone 2005, p189) – and in this mediated world the photograph, website and newspaper become the interrelated sites through which the negotiations of meanings and social relationships can be explored. But processes of mediation do not stop at a textual level (Silverstone 1999) and so the responses proffered collectively and individually in the focus groups suggest patterns of self-identification and distancing, as the participants position themselves in relation to the depicted soldiers and the media’s selective retelling. Following John B. Thompson, this is then an inquiry into “the nature of self, experience and everyday life in a mediated world” (1995, 207) with a particular focus on military lives. In asking (ex) military personnel and families to respond to media texts, I am taking seriously Sonia Livingstone’s claim that “people understand the world and their position in it through the media” (2009, 5). As Livingstone argues, questions of identity, inequality and power are explored in such enquiries into how the media mediate: “we are interested in the processes of mediation primarily because they reveal the changing relations among social structures and agents rather than because they tell us about ‘the media’ per se” (p.5).

The selected news story centres on an image taken by a fellow soldier – the (illicit) use of cameras by soldiers in the battlefield has a long history (Struk 2011) but the digital technologies which now enable anyone to take countless images and to share and store them across devices has led to both new everyday photographic practices and new concerns and regulations over their use. Online platforms such as YouTube also facilitate the emergence of new genres for soldiers to not only communicate their everyday experiences but to also perform identities and construct memories through emotionally charged commemoration videos to fallen soldiers (Knudsen and Stage 2013), or in surprise homecoming videos

(Silvestri 2013). Notoriously, Chris Wilson's website *Nowthatsfuckedup.com* offered US soldiers a barter system for those unable to use credit cards when in the theatre of war – accessing free amateur pornography in exchange for gory images (see Andén-Papadopoulos 2009; Struk 2011). Writing before the site was closed down by the Pentagon, Chris Thompson noted in the *East Bay Express* that few US newspapers had taken up the story and made the point that: “Americans have thousands of media outlets to choose from. But they still have to visit a porn site to see what this war has done to the bodies of the dead and the souls of the living” (Thompson 2005, n.p.).

For Andén-Papadopoulos the repetitive and ritualistic practices of sharing such images can be understood as “symptoms of an affective reliving of traumatic war experiences, serving at once to authenticate and cancel out a hurtful reality” and to “establish the borders and core values of the military community against the outside world” (2009, 922). Echoing Thompson's point above, Andén-Papadopoulos suggests that the soldiers are asking us to “bear witness” to their realities of war denied a place in mainstream media. The idea that Americans (or others) “have to visit a porn site” to see the destroyed human bodies of war epitomises the very rottenness at the heart of military culture for some, but for Thompson, the real scorn is directed at an anodyne mainstream media which fails to display such realities and therefore prompt critical ethical questions.

We can see then how such new media technologies have presented challenges for military authorities, who attempt to balance the potential humanising connective qualities in these direct forms of soldier-produced communication with the dangers in terms of operational security and reputational damage (Christensen 2008; Hellman and Wagnsson 2015). The Abu Ghraib scandal focused attention on how soldiers, in seeking to entertain themselves, could produce damaging and terrifying imagery (Andén-Papadopoulos 2008; Danner 2004). More recently Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2015, 1325) have argued that “military, media, and political actors, who initially struggled to adapt to the new media ecology [...] have now more fully harnessed its digital potential”, captured in the “synergies” of military and mainstream media in programs such as *Our War* (BBC3), compiled from soldiers' own footage from Afghanistan. As forms of mainstream media have embraced the intimate and vernacular “media of the self” (1325) offered by soldiers, the more disturbing imagery has been squeezed out of the picture. Accepting that the personalization of the soldier has become a powerful resource in the reconciliation of civil-military relations, it is then especially instructive to examine a case where the soldier's personal footage disrupts this humanising trend.

The 'Public Secret' of Killing in War

Soldier photography and the mediation of such images (whether openly shared or leaked) offer visions of war which destabilise both the established professional processes of (photo)journalism and the “discrete categories and genres of visual information” (Kennedy 2009, 832-3), where amateur and sometimes playful imagery crosses the boundary into shared public knowledge in disturbing ways. Such moments present an opportunity to scrutinize the partial unmasking of violence conducted by ‘our boys’ that the print media are usually happy to applaud as long as it remains out-of-sight.

In analysing Israeli militarism and social media practices via Michael Taussig's concept of the “public secret” (1999), Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca Stein offer a perceptive study into how the Israeli military occupation is managed through public discourse as both “common knowledge” and a “dirty secret” (2015, 43). For Kuntsman and Stein a “public secret” is “a secret that is known to the public but which the public chooses to keep from itself through various cultural strategies and mechanisms” (15). The UK context is very

different of course, but this notion is instructive for understanding the knowledge fracture that a soldier-produced photograph of violence or killing potentially reveals. As Kuntsman and Stein write, “the public secret is predicated on a set of oppositions: exposure and concealment, the expected and the scandalous” (43). Similarly in this case the media perform a dance of knowing and not knowing: exposing the story but concealing details, revelling in the presumed scandal but rationalizing the transgressions by focusing on the subsequent military investigation.

This partial societal unmasking corresponds to the difficulties soldiers recount in their return from war, where the broken or fractured psyche is common trope, as is the mask which they put on to face the civilian world. Karl Marlantes describes such experiences in his psychological study and memoir, *What it is like to go to war* (2011). In writing specifically of the moment of killing, Marlantes tells of “splitting oneself” in order to kill for society: “Killing someone without splitting oneself from the feelings that the act engenders requires an effort of supreme consciousness that, quite frankly, is beyond most humans. Killing is what warriors do for society” (2011, 26).

Marlantes writes that in the moment of killing the exhilaration could feel “akin to scoring the winning touchdown” (26) but with the passing of time it is sadness he feels. It would appear that soldiers and veterans embody this unsettling space between the oxymoronic “public secret” and also struggle with the renunciations of a prurient yet moral media and society. The idea of being asked to kill for a seemingly detached yet disapproving public is the hardest aspect to reconcile.

‘Britain’s Camp Bastion shame’

The news story of British soldiers posing with dead Taliban² fighters emerged in May 2014, after user ‘tdubz1993’ uploaded the images to LiveLeak in April (LiveLeak 2014), and consequently prompted a military police investigation. Surveying the news story through media website searches and the Nexis database, the story first appears in the online editions of the BBC, Telegraph, Mail and Independent on 9 May 2014. Around this time, Defence Secretary Philip Hammond had been visiting Camp Bastion and the LiveLeak story was bookmarked with more positive and planned announcements, for example extending women’s roles on the frontline. But this planned announcement is soon overshadowed by the LiveLeak photo story, attracting coverage across the national media titles on 10 May, and also picked up by international media (e.g. Russia Today, Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya). The Independent gives the story most prominence by displaying it on the front-page of both its website and the print version of ‘The-i’, its compact sister paper on 10 May (Owen 2014).

This study chose *The i* on Saturday’s front page to show the research participants (Figure 1): with its stark headline (“Britain’s Camp Bastion shame”, May 10, 2014), three sub-heads and large photograph, it served as an effective prompt without requiring extensive reading. Further details were made available to provide context, but the story was already familiar to all respondents (having only been reported a month or two earlier).

[INSERT FIGURE 1: Front page of ‘*The i on Saturday*’, 10 May 2014 HERE]

As Figure 1 shows, the serviceman’s face has been obscured, and the image cropped to exclude the corpse of the Afghan fighter. On page 4 of the same newspaper, a second image of a soldier posing with the body is also reproduced, captioned, “A picture appearing to show an RAF man posing with a dead Taliban fighter”, again with the soldier’s face obscured and only the clothed torso of the dead man visible. The set of images’ authenticity

is not questioned in this setting; the protective blurring accomplishes a simultaneous act of concealment and verification in the news context.

The BBC website uses extensive circular frosting to obscure the images – placed over the soldiers’ faces, insignia and the dead man’s body or face, so that no blood is visible. This method is replicated in other news websites and papers, most of which credit LiveLeak directly. The photos are described within the main text as “gruesome” (The-i), “graphic” (Mirror), “damning” (Mail) and “disturbing” (Metro, Mail). The broadsheets tend to avoid using such guiding adjectives in their reporting, although the Guardian does refer to “so-called trophy photographs” (MacAskill 2014). It is not my intention to conduct a detailed analysis of the news stories but we can briefly note the key facts and the news framing choices that recur: the pictures were taken on 14 September 2012, after a Taliban attack on Camp Bastion (apparently with Prince Harry as the target), which led to a three/four-hour battle in which two US servicemen were killed and many others injured (including UK forces). Two members of 51 Squadron RAF Regiment, who were involved in defending the base, have now been withdrawn from frontline duties after the pictures were posted on LiveLeak in April 2014 (nineteen months after the snapshots were taken). RAF police are treating the case “extremely seriously” with an investigation underway. The actions are described as “inappropriate” yet “understandable” by retired military voices, who do not condone the taking of the images, but recognise the soldiers’ elation at surviving the battle.

New and Old Photographic Practices

Before moving on it is worth returning briefly to the original uploading of the images. Viewing the uncensored photographs on LiveLeak (2014), there are two ‘thumbs-up’ images next to the body of the dead fighter, apparently depicting two different men. Another photo portrays the bloodied body alone on the ground, and there are three pictures of destroyed Harrier jets. Professional photojournalistic images are not generally perceived as “authored texts” due to their naturalised function as accurate depictions (Parry 2011). Yet in this case, the soldier-produced imagery is authored (albeit pseudonymously), possibly even doubly authored, by the soldier pictured and the second soldier behind the camera. The two soldiers picture themselves in snapshot style photography and declare themselves present: “Here I am, smiling at my comrade holding the camera, next to a dead enemy fighter”. Such conventions are those of amateur snapshots, “which are also ‘real-time’ images of events as they happened” (Taylor 2005, 39), and so the amateurish style conveys an immediacy, authenticity and familiarity despite the murky, moonscape setting. In uploading the pictures to LiveLeak, the invitation to “look at me” is extended to an online community dedicated to “redefining the media” as the website’s tagline states. The characteristic aesthetic of the images and videos uploaded to the website veer towards the bizarre, knowingly puerile or humorous, but alongside the main tabs for “Must See” and “Your Say” are others dedicated to “Syria” and “Ukraine”. With other video captions promoting slow-motion kill shots, apparently in an effort to attract more views, it would suggest that users earn credibility and kudos through uploading graphic and visceral imagery.

The pre-pixilated images also reveal a detail which had been obscured in the mainstream news publications. One of the servicemen not only gives the ‘thumbs up’ but also has what appears to be a cigarette hanging from his mouth. Once this detail becomes clear, it raises the possibility that the soldiers are not merely practicing the established pose of the trophy image, but are taking part in a photo-meme known as “doing a Lynndie”, so named after the infamous gesture of Lynndie England in the Abu Ghraib images (Danner 2004). The Know you Meme website cites a British blog, Bad Gas, as the first source of this meme, explaining the instructions for “doing” or “pulling a Lynndie”, which among others include;

“Stick a cigarette (or pen) in your mouth and allow it to hang slightly below the horizontal”; “Make a hitchhiking gesture with your right hand and extend your right arm so that it’s in roughly the same position as if you were holding a rifle”; “Keeping your left arm slightly bent, point in the direction of the victim and smile” (RandomMan 2014).

It is impossible to know for sure if the soldiers are taking part in meme culture although, as Lisa Silvestri (2015) writes with reference to the US military, this kind of activity has become an increasingly popular mode of cultural participation for service personnel in the theatre of war. It could be a coincidence that one soldier has a cigarette nonchalantly hanging from his mouth, but given the battlefield setting for these images, the echoes of the Lynndie pose are hard to dismiss altogether. Trophy photos from Vietnam also depict smiling soldiers kneeling by bodies (Engelhardt 2015), so it could be that it is Lynndie who is echoing earlier representations, and not just those found in modern photographic practices. Indeed, in a comparison of Abu Ghraib imagery to earlier photographs of “commemorative violence”, Joey Brooke Jakob notes the cigarette “casually dangling from his grinning mouth” (2016, 8) with reference to a British soldier pictured holding up a captured Japanese flag in Burma during the Second World War. Stephen Eisenman traces the “Abu Ghraib effect” even further back in Western visual culture, arguing that references to artists such as Goya, Picasso or Bacon obscure deeper historical roots – that images of torture and power are in fact “widely embedded in both visual memory and the physical body” (Eisenman 2007, 15). Whether knowingly or not the RAF servicemen, by posing in the images and sharing them online, participate in this unsettling collective “visual memory” of war.

It is worth pointing out that whilst the images appear to show the servicemen posing for photographs with the corpses, there was no suggestion in the reports of staging the scenes, mistreatment of the bodies, or of torture or humiliation. The notion of participation in a visual memory of war should not lead us to collapse the moral meaning of each eerily familiar occurrence into a readymade category of ‘atrocities’ or ‘trophy’ images where revulsion is the only moral response. Rather it should prompt us to consider the circumstances of each familiar iteration and to question the assumptions of a news discourse which identifies the soldiers as exceptional ‘bad apples’.

Research Design and Methods

This is a qualitative study, both in terms of its interest in a single news story for what it articulates about vernacular photographic practices and controversial imagery; and in its attention to active, interpreting audiences who have a keen interest in the subject matter. Perhaps the study which comes closest in design is Woodward and Jenkins’ use of photo-elicitation in their interviews with military personnel in which “the respondent’s own photographs or other images were used as a basis for the discussion about military experience and identity” (2011, 257). Whilst this current article focuses on the news photo-story, participants were also shown extracts from a range of media forms and genres (documentary, comedy, websites) within the same sessions (Parry and Thumim 2016). Focus group style interviews offer the benefits of reaching multiple participants in one session, allowing the researcher to observe interactions between people as they respond to media extracts, and how meaning is negotiated through social interactions. With sessions lasting up to two hours, this method has the advantages of semi-structured group interviews rather than questionnaires (Hansen and Machin, 2013: 11-12); specifically allowing space to explore emotions, experiences and negotiations of meaning and perceptions. This can produce a “richer set of data” than single-person interviews, as participants “react to one another’s comments” and a potentially intimidating dynamic between interviewer and interviewee is avoided (Priest

2010, 104). However there are also limitations to this approach – this is an exploratory study conducted with a small group of people and cannot claim to be representative. It is wise therefore to avoid generalising claims on the basis of the group interview data. Instead the interest here is in the perceptions of media portrayals by those most affected by recent conflicts within the UK (veterans, family members, serving personnel).

Other studies have included blogs or forum users' responses to mediated content of this nature (e.g. Andén-Papadopoulos 2009), but it is rare to find comparable scholarship which is based on qualitative social research, and which aims to give voice to the forces community (including critical veterans and families) in analysing such news events. Related in different ways are Rowling et al.'s (2015) questionnaire-based study on public responses to a news story about US military transgressions in Afghanistan, and Silvestri's (2015) interviews with US Marines about their own social media practices. This study has a similar interest in ways experiences are talked about; but in this case within group discussions and in response to relevant news media materials.

In total 31 participants took part in focus groups conducted during the summer of 2014: this comprised 15 veterans from three different organizations, six serving personnel who work within media operations, and 10 family members, all wives.³ In terms of gender, this was split between 12 women and 19 men. Most of the groups were identified as pre-existing groups who already met regularly for social or support reasons and were recruited via email, phone call or social media request. All discussions took place in locations where the groups usually meet or work which provided a relaxed and suitable setting. Finding serving personnel to take part in the focus groups proved more difficult and I am grateful to the Joint Information Activities Group, Media Operations team, who were happy to take part and to be credited openly. It should be acknowledged therefore that the serving personnel quoted here had an especial interest and expertise in the image management of the armed forces. This gives them a very particular normative approach to media representations of the military – that the media should be presenting a positive portrayal. However, efforts were made to balance such perspectives by speaking to veteran groups with varied policy objectives or missions, including those critical of militarization in society. Other than naming the Media Operations group here, the group interview data is anonymised and any names referred to by participants below are pseudonyms.

Findings: Misrepresentations in the news media

Before introducing the featured photo news story, at the start of the focus group sessions participants were asked: "When you think about British military experience and the media, are there certain programs or stories which come to mind?". Interestingly the question prompted responses on varied media forms: documentaries, Hollywood films, military awards ('The Millies') and dramas. But news coverage was often the first to emerge, and mostly in negative terms:

F1 It kind of goes two ways, it's either the hero stories or the fatalities; there's nothing in the middle, to me, black and white. (Wives group 1)

In a different wives' group, the participants elaborate on the failings of the news media.

F2 I don't watch the news, and **my motto is what I don't know I don't know**, so the news doesn't go on, if he's in Afghanistan it doesn't go on, that's it.

F1 It's like they've been in Afghanistan for so long and done so many good things, but **it takes that little idiot who records himself doing something to the**

Taliban and then the whole media shoots on that instead of what they've actually done good, and so all those years are down the drain because of that one silly person recording it. (Wives group 2)

The discriminatory power of the media is touched on here – to create heroes and villains, to undo “good” and to bring unbidden knowledge into everyday life. Various participants speak of resorting to a coping mechanism of avoiding the news altogether, certainly when their husbands are in Afghanistan. By not watching the news, the news cannot harm F2. In the above discussion one interviewee pre-empts the type of news story selected; and in her comments she invests such stories with the power to undo years of “good”. Scholars interested in media often show a tendency to concentrate on how audiences engage with certain media forms and content, forgetting that the response of deliberately avoiding them altogether sometimes ascribes phenomenal power to those forms.

When participants are later shown the news photo story on “Britain’s Camp Bastion shame” (Figure 1), it prompted some of the strongest reactions in the sessions – in one group, a participant turned the page over and refused to discuss it at all (momentarily enacting the “what I don’t know I don’t know” gesture described above). The labels of “silly” and “idiot” used above were joined by “dipstick” and “pillock” in some initial reactions to the story.

M1 It’s no good us complaining about the ISIS beheading people, and all these other nasty things that are going on, if we’re not **whiter than white**, as it were. There are rules of engagement and there’s rules for handling prisoners and you’ve **got to play it straight**. [...]

M3 Well, you don’t know, you’re only reading what’s on the front of there and there’s a photograph of a guy with his thumbs up and what does that mean? **You can pixilate my face right now if you like, it’s not going to mean that I’m doing anything dodgy!** Again, you read into it what you want to read.

F2 Yeah, I think it’s again sensationalism and a lot of good is done and that doesn’t come through at all. These sort of things are just **blown out of proportion**, and although it **looks bad**, we don’t-

M1 You don’t pose with a dead body.

F2 No.

M4 No. (Veteran Group 3)

For this group rules and standards should be adhered to, with certainty and moral clarity expressed through familiar idioms: “whiter than white”; “play it straight”. The female speaker here starts to raise objections to the sensationalism of the media portrayal but the discourse of ‘common decency’ prevails. M3 questions what we know from the photograph; interestingly he also jokes about the visual strategies of concealment (pixilation) that signal the person is doing something “dodgy”: the masking of the face is at once protective and damning. The respondents are negotiating the unsettling contours of the “public secret”, questioning what is knowable or acknowledgeable whilst characterizing the incident as an exceptional breach of the armed forces’ rules and “resilient ethical code” (Kuntsman and Stein 2015, 85). The extract above hints at possible ambiguities and doubts, and such counter-readings and objections actually became the dominant reactions in our groups, albeit in varied forms.

For the media operations team, the deconstruction of the story was methodical and undoubtedly revealed prior knowledge of its perceived media mishandling. The female officer cited below was also keen to challenge the idea of cameras being “ubiquitous” on the battlefield.

F1 So we do this for very good reasons, as you've said, cameras are ubiquitous on the battlefield, well they're not, and they're not supposed to be for this very reason, because we don't want this kind of photograph getting into the press and undermining everything that we've been trying to achieve in Afghanistan. That's the first issue. The second issue is obviously that he was idiot enough to actually get it found out. And the third issue is that the press then publish this. The context wasn't known about the photograph, which subsequently came out, but the MoD [Ministry of Defence] immediately tried to deal with it and made a **serious misstep by saying they were investigating the extremely serious case of mistreatment.** (Media Ops group)

For this female officer, the pictured serviceman is an "idiot" but the greatest criticism is actually aimed at the Ministry of Defence for overstating the seriousness of the case when the investigation had not yet determined the events. For a media operations officer, this "misstep" of responding too defensively and quickly inadvertently corroborates the negative interpretation of the leaked photographs. In the precise listing of three "issues" to be addressed, the speaker's focus is entirely on how to diminish the consequences and the lessons to be learned from such "missteps". The officer effectively performs her modern professional military skills, not in relation to physical endurance or marksmanship in this case (Woodward and Jenkins 2011), but in her ability to reflect on institutional mistakes and in her commitment to a narrative of achievement in Afghanistan. In the era of mediatised war, "in which the practice of war is enacted through, involves, and is dependent upon media reportage", impression management is intrinsic to "all" military activity (Maltby 2012, 15). But she also later offers a different interpretation of the photograph offered by "subsequent talking heads", one which follows acceptable military conduct:

F1: Whereas subsequent talking heads said he may have been giving a thumbs-up to his MAC [?] that this guy's clean, **'I've checked for ID, he's dead, he's not going to be attacking us again.'** It could have been anything, quite frankly... (Media Ops group)

This raises the prospect that the photograph's meaning has been entirely misinterpreted in the news re-presentation. The alternative reading of the image offered here, in which the serviceman is giving the thumbs-up to indicate he has merely checked the body, also emerged in our veterans' groups. Veterans' Group 1 referred to the importance of hand signals in battle and expressed anger at the media for condemning the soldier, initially evoking their sensorial experiences of war: "you cannot hear anything". The story had clearly provoked earlier discussion, apparently also within private Facebook conversations in military circles, and the group strongly rejected the claims being made, moving through various aspects of the news story.

M1 Yeah, and you can't hear anything so it is literally **hand signals**, and he's like that, and that's what it is [thumbs up] and the chances are that's probably what it was, because **you cannot hear anything.**

[...]

M3 It actually says on the article, 'MoD investigating extremely serious case,' but why do they print it? If the MoD are investigating, why is it there in print for everybody? Basically, **they've condemned the guy before the investigation** has taken place.

[...]

M4 The thing is the apology for that, **when he's found not guilty**, it will be no bigger than that print on page 39, by the sports news or the holiday planners (Veterans Group 1)

So, the image itself, the words explaining the meaning of the image, the investigation, all were questioned in their strong desire to believe that he was merely giving the 'thumbs up' to say he was okay. Their co-constructed oppositional reading constitutes a persistent (post)military identification, built upon a defensive form of recognition and empathy, even extended to an anonymised figure they do not know. In a sense, the group co-create an interpretation between them that they find acceptable, one that is both consonant with their own distrust of the media and their role in supporting veterans, and even extending the story into the future, with an imagined apology "when he's found not guilty".

For the veterans, the unacceptability is located in the news re-presentation and framing of the depicted events. However, once this certainty of mis-representation at the hands of the media has been established, there is also some recognition that capturing such souvenir images is part of their own military experience. Here a member of the same group (Veteran Group 1) recalls taking photographs in the Iraq war, again qualifying that this kind of trophy image-taking was not "as bad as" some of the others:

M1 ...Don't get me wrong, there are photographs out there they have taken, and I've got some, I've got some from the Iraq war, where we're there with the dead Iraqis, but **because you're squaddies, that's what you do**. We weren't as bad as some of the films they show where they put the cigarettes in the mouth and stuff like that, but **you take a photograph of it to show somebody**, 'Yeah, that's what it was like, **that's what war's like.**' (Veterans Group 1)

So despite the challenges to the very premise of the news story, taking photographs of dead enemy is also expressed as something "squaddies" do because they're squaddies, with the motivation of showing others "what war is like". The respondent's comments hint at the dehumanisation of the enemy's body implicated in the photographic practices: a secondary "commemorative violence" that casts them as "conquerable, inanimate object[s]" (Jakob 2016, 10). But this is also part of "what war's like" for the soldiers, where 'showing' stands in for an inability to articulate exactly what this means and how it feels. Following Andén-Papadopoulou (2009), such rituals of image taking and sharing both invite others to "bear witness" to soldiers' experiences whilst also paradoxically constructing bonds exclusive to those within the military community.

The impulse to form a shared narrative around traumatic events was also discussed in another veterans' group. In describing how group narratives can become the 'truth', even though they might be false, the veterans commented critically on how such strategies for dealing with trauma relate to the irrational and immoral nature of warfare.

M2 Yes, it's highly managed, and going back to what we talked about right at the start, **where soldiers come up with their own narrative to explain chaotic and irrational situations, is right at the start, right at the start**, before any of the media gets anywhere near it, the stories have already been changed and prepared. (Veterans group 2)

The photographs are taken to show what war is like, to attempt to make sense of a chaotic and traumatic event and because they are the moments which are chosen to be emphasised in the shared account. But for this speaker, where there is a trace of honesty in the collective

and cohesive narrative formed to make sense of irrational events, the dishonesty of the news coverage is in its pseudo-condemnation of exceptional ‘bad apples’.

M2 But also, **so what?** ‘Serviceman posing with dead Taliban.’ In Infantry Units in the Parachute Regiment, and the Marines especially, **the highest honour or the top of the food chain thing that you could do is kill someone.** It occupies your mind! ... **So if you’ve got that as the highest goal, then of course people are going to take photos of it.** (Veteran Group 2)

The motivation to take photographs comes from the belief in killing the enemy being the “highest goal”, something rarely achieved and which your training works towards. So even in a veterans’ group that shares an anti-militaristic stance in their own work, there is a reluctance to extend that criticism to a soldier who takes a photo of a confirmed kill, their “highest honour” after all. For Karl Marlantes, a more honest and open debate can only be realized when we address the destructive yet seductive intensities of war: “The more we recognize the feelings of transcendence and the psychological and spiritual intensity of war, the easier it will be to prevent their appeal from clouding our judgment about going to war the next time” (2011, 256).

These latter responses demonstrate the complexities at play where the desires to mediate both the trauma and the elation of war – through storytelling and photographs – clash uncomfortably with the popular media representations which do not deal with this side of soldiering in a forthcoming or honest way. In fact, the unsettled and antagonistic responses are likely prompted by the very remarkability of this kind of imagery in the press: as Struk (2011, 175) argues, snapshots taken by soldiers are “deemed problematical, confusing or unacceptable” precisely because they “capture fragments” of the “brutal, mundane, frightening and shameful world of war” rather than conform to the ‘heroism and humanity’ associated with the genre of war photography. And so while the news reporting anticipates (and arguably performs) public outrage towards British servicemen posing with dead bodies, greater complexities and ambiguities are revealed in the responses here, including both real anger at the public shaming of a soldier (for simply giving the ‘thumbs up’ signal that the body has simply been checked over for ID) and also a “so what?” response to recording the moment which all your training has led you to.

Conclusion

To finish, I consider the various moments of mediation captured in this case; first, considering the distinct moments of transgressive visual mediation taking place in varied locations, times and through different media; and second, on the insights offered by the research participants.

The soldiers are performing a social photographic practice familiar to anyone with a camera phone or other digital recording device. This familiarity contrasts in disturbing ways with the aspects of war which are less familiar to the general public but fundamental to combat experience – killing the enemy combatant. As suggested earlier, it is possible that the soldiers also take part in a distinctively social media practice – performing a photo-meme which is itself based on controversial wartime snapshots. The moment of taking the photographs offers a personal expression of exhilaration and relief in an extreme situation, but by the time the photographs are uploaded to the website they are many memories’ old, and so this is an intentional rather than immediate moment of mediation, one which assumes a degree of shared commonalities with an online community (assuming the uploader is one of the soldiers). By the stage of the news mediation the photographs have become evidentiary

texts of misconduct and moral condemnation. The journalistic framing works to both proffer the captured moment as exceptional and shameful but also understandable and under control (under investigation). A moment of killing, a moment of picturing, a moment of sharing, a moment of exposure, all coalesce in a news story which attempts to make each event or action comprehensible. Through this series of communicative moves the smiling, exhilarated ‘glad to be alive’ soldier transforms into an object subject, but this too is unstable, contested and momentary.⁴

The insertion of a personal snapshot into the news narrative has a dislocating effect which serves to highlight the more conventional and prominent presentation of the fighting forces. Transgressive behaviour is suggested in the afforded anonymity, where the masking of the face is in stark contrast to the prominent and formal picturing and personalisation of soldiers when their own deaths are reported (King 2010). The news media assume a position of collective morality, on the side of policing legitimate behaviours but perfectly happy to exploit such a story. In this way the visibility of killing by UK armed forces is managed as a “public secret” (Kuntsman and Stein 2015), known but contained and masked through rhetorical and visual devices. But this transitory, image-driven pot-stirring fails to engage with deeper ambiguities and profound fractures. I argue that this fracturing is embodied in the subjectivity of the returning soldier, for whom the easy symbolism of “helping the heroes” and “supporting the troops” sits uneasily with the lack of comprehension they meet in “civvy street” (Herman and Yarwood 2014).

The resistance to the news media framing among the focus group participants is possibly not so surprising. They are not members of ‘the public’, but those personally and professionally invested in such representations. But even within this small sample, the range of normative positions, imagined motivations, professional expertise and recounted experiences are varied, ambivalent and complex. Yet in these multiple ways they reveal an empathetic and even protective response towards someone they often initially label as an “idiot” or “pillock”. Their responses alert us to the varied impulses and motivations of those who take such photos, but also the ways in which the meanings of such images cannot be ‘fixed’ even with resolutely evaluative news framing. This study has a specific interest in the responses of those with a vested interest, but extending such research to include journalists, editors, or the ‘general public’ is likely to present revealing comparisons.

Overall this case points to the difficulties that a number of servicemen and women have in attempting to relate their world to others (in producing images, stories) and also in making sense of the world around them (in their uses of media). In attempting to show “what war’s like” the pictured servicemen disrupt the moral certainties of military conduct and so are cast as exceptional ‘bad apples’. But deeper certainties and tropes remain intact; the dead Afghan fighter remains an “ungrievable” figure (Butler 2009), the vulnerability of his destroyed body further obscured by pixilation or cropping.

By reproducing some of the exchanges in the focus groups, the aim here is not to suggest they are representative of the military community, but to demonstrate the kinds of struggles and negotiations of meaning prompted by an ambiguous but damaging news story. I would argue that at the heart of the struggles for meaning when a serviceman attempts to capture and share “what war’s like” is a widespread confusion about the purpose of the war in Afghanistan and a broader duplicitous disassociation from the killing that is done “for society” (Marlantes 2011). When killing in war starts to look personal, captured through personal visual practices, it unsettles its lawful or moral justifications. It is my contention that where the media or others with no direct experience express simplistic certainties about war, the opportunity to engender dialogue and understanding becomes narrowed, as veterans or soldiers retreat into military cultures of shared understanding. As Silvestri states, “war is a collective, political, public trauma. It is a social ill. We are all morally implicated in acts of

war” (2015, 158). This article does not intend to justify transgressive military conduct or visual practices, but to show how discussing such moments might elucidate how returning soldiers reconcile the experiences of war with civilian life; and the varied roles that media and mediating practices play in such processes. The ambiguities, contradictions and perceived misrepresentations offer a productive space to challenge what we think we know about war.

NOTES

1. I use “soldier” here as a catch-all term but I am aware of its inadequacies in covering all military roles (sailor, marine, etc.), and will also refer to “servicemen” and “combatants”. Moss and Prince (2014, ix-x) provide a useful summary on the difficulties of choosing such terms, including “warrior” which is more common in US and Canadian writing (e.g. see Silvestri 2015; Marlantes 2011).
2. “Taliban” is also a problematic term and a media readiness to use the label for all those fighting ISAF forces in Afghanistan belies the complexities of the motivations and loyalties of those who have been fighting in some cases for decades. In this case, the Taliban descriptor is less controversial given the context of the attack on Camp Bastion and the relevant communications from Taliban headquarters.
3. Whilst the current article is single-authored, the focus groups were conducted with Nancy Thumim and Ysabel Gerrard as part of a larger British Academy project on ‘Representations of contemporary soldiering in digital and visual cultures’.
4. Other than selective commentary and letters in the following days the story disappears, and so far I have been unable to find out whether an investigation took place, let alone its conclusion.

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